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The Unresolvable 'Russian Question': The Role of the Soviet Legacy and Post-Communist Realities

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> Many... citizens of Russia (*rossiiskie grazhdane*) do not appreciate the fact that the Russia which emerged [after the collapse of the USSR] is not just about new borders. [Are we witnessing] the creation of a new ethno-cultural Russian nation (*russkaia natsiia*) or a civic Russian nation (*rossiiskaia natsiia*)? Or both? … Some would think that these questions have no relevance to our everyday life, yet the disintegration of the USSR demonstrates that sometimes the presence or absence of answers to these abstract questions determine our life for years to come.[1]

This observation made in 2005 by a Russian journalist, Aleksandr Mekhanik, continues to capture the dilemma that has been facing Russia since 1991. It was Russia's second president, Vladimir Putin, who took up the project of nation-building (the construction of a compound national identity) particularly seriously. The restoration of Russia as a great power was identified by Putin as a key goal upon his rise to supreme power in 1999. It was to be achieved, among other things, through the articulation and dissemination of a particular discourse of nation-building. The ways of coping with the country's ethnic and confessional heterogeneity and of addressing historically rooted ambiguities of the position of ethnic Russians, which the Putin administration has articulated, have been, in some aspects, novel and, in others, determined by the legacy of the Soviet policies and the developments of the 1990s.

This article looks at the state of the 'Russian question' (the place and role of ethnic Russians within the Soviet and Russian state; the political leaders' approaches to the construction of Russian identity(ies) and popular perceptions of Russian nationhood) since 1917, paying particular attention to the dynamics of Russian nation-building since 2000.

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[1] www.expert.ru/printissues/expert/2005/01/.

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Historical background

In his assessment of the dilemmas facing the Putin administration in the sphere of nation-building, Mekhanik rightly noted the importance of the Soviet legacy. Indeed, the Soviet nationalities policies and the Soviet understanding of the terms nation (*narod*, *natsiia*), nationality (*natsionalnost*) and ethnicity (*etnos*, *etnicheskaia prinadlezhnost*) have been exercising a formative impact on how the elites and the peoples of the newly independent states of the former USSR, Russians included, have been defining their new nationhoods.

The formative feature of the Soviet nationalities policies was, in Rogers Brubaker's words, an 'unprecedented, thoroughgoing institutionalization' of territorial nationhood and ethnic nationality *at the sub-state level*, as the Bolshevik leadership carved up the state into numerous national territories, each defined as the homeland of and for a particular ethnonational group. The regime also divided the peoples of the Soviet state into mutually exclusive ethnic nationalities, turning an ethnically understood nationality into a fundamental form of social accounting. At the same time, the focus on system maintenance through a strong vertical power line running from Moscow to the peripheries and the discouragement of horizontal ties between the state's individual administrative units weakened the formation of an over-arching Soviet identity. Even though the Soviet leadership suppressed the manifestations of political nationalism in the constituent republics of the USSR, the nationalities policies nevertheless laid the basis for the country's eventual disintegration, as they inadvertently created a political environment highly conducive to ethno-cultural nationalism detrimental to state unity.[2]

The status of the Russians in the multi-national Soviet state was acknowledged by the Bolsheviks as problematic already in 1922. How could the Russians – a dominant nationality in the tsarist empire – fit within the multi-national Soviet state, all of whose nationalities were proclaimed to be equal by the Bolsheviks. One of the proposals was to create an ethnic Union Russian republic with the institutional structures identical to those introduced for the major non-Russian nationalities, but it was rejected by Stalin on the grounds that such a Russian republic (particularly if a separate Communist Party were to be established there) would pose too strong a challenge to the central leadership and that it would stimulate the rise of Russian nationalism, a force widely perceived at the time as threatening to the non-Russians. Instead, within the Soviet Union, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was set up as a multi-ethnic federation, whose entire territory was permeated by national institutions for

[2] Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.23-54.

non-Russian minorities. The national self-expression of the Russians was suppressed, and the Russians were stigmatised as the oppressor-nation.[3] Not only members of the anti-Soviet Russian intelligentsia, but also regional Russian party leaders complained about 'the anti-Russian nature' of these policies.[4]

The impact of the Bolshevik policies on Russia and the Russians preoccupied not only those who stayed at home. Numerous people, including famous intellectuals and former politicians, left the country voluntarily or otherwise at the time of the radical upheavals engendered by the war and the revolution. Abroad they continued to debate the plight of their country, expressing views ranging from pro-Soviet to monarchist, from liberal democratic to highly authoritarian. In this heterogeneous context of exile, a set of proposals about how the Russian state should be organised, which still continue to be influential, was formulated by the émigré movement, the Eurasians. Postulating that a unique Eurasian, neither European nor Asian, civilisation had been formed through centuries of interaction between the peoples of the former Russian empire, the Eurasians argued that the peoples of 'Russia-Eurasia' should possess a simultaneous sense of belonging to their own culturally defined national groups and to the overarching pan-Eurasian nation. The Eurasians acknowledged the equality of all the nationalities of 'Russia-Eurasia', yet they still insisted on a special status of ethnic Russians and favoured Orthodoxy above other religions.[5] In developing their thinking about how to maintain the state unity, the Eurasians responded directly to the Soviet policies. In the 1920s, the Eurasians shared with the Bolsheviks the perception of danger posed by exclusive ethnic Russian nationalism to the state unity, yet they criticized the Bolsheviks for failing to pay sufficient attention to fostering a compound identity which would be shared by all nationalities of the state.[6]

In the 1930s, changing domestic priorities and the new international context led to the revision of the earlier Soviet approach to the nationalities question. It is significant for our understanding of the subsequent dynamics of the Russian nation-building that the formative years, in terms of providing long-lasting institutional arrangements for the Russians within the Soviet state and of articulating dominant interpretations of Russian history and culture for

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[3] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp.394-431.
[4] Ibid, pp.401-402.
[5] N.S. Trubetzkoy, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan and Other Essays on Russia's Identity* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1991), pp.233-244. For a good survey of scholarly debates around the origins and legacy of the Eurasianist thought, see Mark Bassin, Sergey Glebov and Marlene Laruelle, eds., *Between Europe and Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).
[6] Trubetzkoy, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan*.

effective dissemination among a population exposed for the first time to mass state-sponsored education, were during the Stalin period. The most significant policy change to be implemented from 1932 onwards was the rethinking of the status of the Russians and the reorganisation of the RSFSR. In the areas of the federation which were predominantly populated by ethnic Russians the non-Russian national institutions were dissolved and, thus, Russian national space was created. Some non-Russian minorities maintained their national autonomies within the RSFSR in the form of autonomous republics (with fewer privileges than the Union republics). It was thus in the 1930s that the RSFSR came to be divided into the Russian core and the non-Russian periphery. Yet, this republic still did not enjoy the institutional framework that existed in the other Union republics, as it continued to lack such institutions as the Russian Communist Party or the Russian Academy of Sciences. Instead, the Russians were expected to perceive pan-Soviet institutions as appropriate channels for the articulation of their interests.[7]

Furthermore, the Russian language and culture began to be glorified as the basis for Soviet unity. In the historical narrative constructed in the 1930s, the Russians became first among equals in the family of Soviet nationalities, selflessly providing fraternal help to the non-Russian peoples. Russian culture was proclaimed to be the most progressive in the world and the USSR was presented as a continuation of Russian statehood dating back to medieval Kievan Rus. Even though the description of these policies by the Russian émigré sociologist Nicholas Timasheff as the 'Great Retreat' is often repeated, in fact, they were not a return to pre-revolutionary Russian values. Instead, these policies reflected a selective co-optation of pre-revolutionary narratives, once those Russian traditions and institutions (e.g. the Orthodox Church or the peasant culture) that the regime viewed as politically threatening had been undermined or altogether destroyed.[8]

The Stalinist discourse crudely divided the world into 'us' and 'them'. It should be remembered that national narratives generally tend to feature unflattering images of the 'Other'. Yet the demonisation of the 'Other', depicted as numerous external and internal enemies plotting to harm the state and its people, was exceptionally powerful in Stalin's period. The history of Russia was presented as a perennial 'heroic battle for independence and freedom against innumerable enemies, conquerors and invaders...'[9] These interpretations were widely disseminated through the educational system and mass culture from the 1930s onwards and

[7] Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, pp.403-412.
[8] Veljko Vujacic, 'Stalinism and Russian Nationalism: A Reconceptualization', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 23, 2 (2007), p.168.
[9] *Bolshevik*, 9 (1938), p.28.

provided the basis for the development of modern mass forms of Russian national identity as, in the 1930s, the state finally achieved the levels of industrialisation and literacy essential for the formation of such identity.[10]

World War II was a key episode in identity formation among all the nationalities of the USSR. The war and the Soviet victory reinforced the juxtaposition of the Soviet Union to the outside (capitalist, Western) world and the perception of the political leadership and strong state as the only forces capable of protecting the people from numerous threats. The victory presented the Soviet leadership with an opportunity to construct a coherent pan-Soviet identity, which could transcend and overpower sub-state ethnonational affiliations, yet this opportunity was missed.[11] The authorities used the upsurge of patriotism generated by the war in order to promote the officially-sponsored version of it, understood as the people's unquestioned loyalty to political leaders. Within this version of Soviet patriotism, the Russians were allotted an even greater role than in the 1930s as, in May 1945, Stalin claimed that they 'were the greatest nation of all the nations' of the Soviet Union. Within the context of the two ideological campaigns which began in 1947 and 1949 respectively, against 'kowtowing before the West' and against cosmopolitanism (with a strong anti-Semitic character), the supremacy of the Russians within the USSR and internationally was emphasized.[12] Accompanied by repressions and discrimination of different groups of society from ethnic minorities to those invalided as a result of the war, such policies, unwittingly, facilitated societal fragmentation, rather than the consolidation of a compound state-framed identity.

On the one hand, Stalin's policies had a formative impact on how the Russians have viewed themselves ever since. At the same time, the crudeness, brutality and inconsistencies of these policies provoked dissatisfaction among the Russians and non-Russians alike. The underdevelopment of the RSFSR's institutional framework as a channel for the articulation of Russian national interests continued to be seen by some as anti-Russian discrimination. The Stalinist interpretations of Russian history and cultural traditions, as well as Stalin's policies, were interpreted by some intellectuals as highly detrimental to the Russians as a nation. In turn, the same policies could be and were interpreted as Russification and a reflection of the inferior status of the non-Russian nationalities.

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[10] David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
[11] Geoffrey Hosking, 'The Second World War and Russian National Consciousness', *Past and Present*, 175, 1 (2002), pp.162-187.
[12] D.G. Nadzhafov and Z.S. Belousova, compl., *Stalin i kosmopolitizm* (Moscow: Materik, 2005).

As, following the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, the room for the articulation of public opinion broadened somewhat, two intertwined trends of major significance for the formation of Russian national identity became visible. One was a bolder articulation by the non-Russian elites of their republic-specific interests. The other was the emergence of what could be termed as a Russian nationalist movement. One of the results of the first trend was that by the late 1960s ethnic Russians residing in the non-Russian republics could no longer necessarily enjoy privileges in accessing higher education and desirable jobs. Instead, priority began to be given to these republics' titular nationalities. By the 1970s, for the first time since the nineteenth century, Russians began to migrate back to 'Russia proper' from the non-Russian peripheries; this development fed into the argument that Russians were discriminated against in the USSR.

The second trend was marked by the appearance of a numerically significant group of Russian intellectuals who openly admitted that for them the loyalty to the Russian nation was separate from and took precedence over Soviet patriotism and could be in conflict with it. This new post-Stalinist Russian national(ist) discourse was heterogeneous. The views of Russian nationalist intellectuals ranged from those similar to the crude, anti-Semitic and anti-Western versions of Russian identity formulated during Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign to a liberal vision of Russia as part of Europe, whose advocates condemned Stalinism.[13] Novel features of this Russian nationalist movement, with particular significance for future developments under Mikhail Gorbachev and post-1991, included the drawing of a distinction between 'the Russian national homeland' and the USSR and the questioning of whether the Soviet Union offered the framework conducive to the development of the Russians as a nation. New ways of identifying 'significant Others', to whom the Russians were contrasted, were also articulated. It was in this period that the peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as Islam as a religion, were added by some conservative nationalist authors to the arsenal of Russia's 'long-established enemies' such as the West or Jews.[14] Not only the underground press, but also the official media reflected these intellectual debates on Russianness.

Some influential members in the CPSU offered patronage to certain groups in the Russian nationalist movement despite its members' critical assessment of various aspects of Soviet policies. Yitzhak Brudny suggested that the Soviet leadership tried to co-opt anti-Western aspects of the Russian nationalist ideology for legitimising anew the weakening Soviet

[13] N. Mitrokhin, *Russkaia partiia* (Moscow: NLO, 2003).
[14] Vera Tolz, 'Forging the Nation: National Identity and Nation Building in Post-Communist Russia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 50, 6 (1998), p.1003.

regime.[15] Nonetheless, scholars have argued retrospectively that, in fact, the emergence of the Russian nationalist movement in the post-Stalin period posed a greater threat to the unity of the USSR than the increased assertiveness of the non-Russian nationalities.[16]

Indeed, in the course of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the RSFSR, led by Boris Yeltsin, had become a driving force in the process of the USSR's disintegration. The fact that, by 1990, conservative Russian nationalists joined forces with anti-reform members of the Communist Party in a campaign to preserve the Soviet Union, as well as the nature of the relationship between Yeltsin and Gorbachev, prompted some scholars to interpret the role of the RSFSR in the demise of the Soviet Union as accidental. Yeltsin's position had nothing to do with Russian nationalism, but instead was determined entirely by his personal ambition of rustling supreme power from Gorbachev, it was concluded. Acting opportunistically in this personal power struggle, Yeltsin pitted the RSFSR (metropole) against the Soviet Union (empire), thus unwittingly engendering a unique situation when a metropole itself facilitated the imperial disintegration.[17] In fact, 'the uniqueness' of the position of the 'Russian metropole' in 1990 and 1991 simply underscored the difficulty of applying to the Soviet Union the analytical models based on the experiences of Europe's colonial empires. As scholars such as Brubaker and Terry Marin showed particularly well, the Soviet Union's nationalities policies were highly unusual, if not unique.

First, these policies facilitated the peaceful nature of the Soviet Union's collapse, as they forged 'national units' into which the country could disintegrate and legitimised their borders in the eyes of the population. Secondly, Soviet policies shaped the options which Yeltsin and his supporter, the Democratic Russia movement, used in their struggle against the Soviet centre in 1990 and 1991. Indeed, during the republican parliamentary elections in 1990, the Democratic Russia appropriated the arguments of Russian nationalists about the discrimination against the Russians in the USSR on the grounds that, in contrast to other major nationalities, the Russians did not have a set of institutions specifically designed to represent their national interests. Against the rapidly deteriorating economic situation in the last years of the USSR's existence, the representation of the RSFSR as a milking cow which fed the non-Russians at the expense of the well-being of the Russian population, articulated by Russian nationalists in the

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[15] Yitzkhak Brudny, *Reinventing Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp.57-67.
[16] Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, 'Chickens Coming Home to Roost: A Perspective on Soviet Ethnic Relations', *Journal of International Affairs*, 45, 2 (1992), p.539.
[17] Ann Sheehy, 'A Bankrupt System, Nationalism and Personal Ambitions,' in Vera Tolz and Ian Elliot, eds., *The Demise of the USSR* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p.13.

1970s, looked convincing to many members of the electorate. At the same time, the new Russia pictured by Yeltsin and the Democratic Russia was to be a European state, and a democracy with a market economy. Thus, in 1990, the two trends hitherto promoted often in separation from each other by Russian intellectuals – one dwelling on the specific needs of the Russians and separating 'Russia' from the USSR and another calling for democratic and market-oriented reforms and integration into European institutional structures – were effectively merged together. The individual components of the programme reinforced each other's attractiveness in the eyes of the Russian electorate, ensuring that the Democratic Russia became the largest faction in the Russian Congress of People's Deputies, of which Yeltsin became chairman. In his first address to the Congress in May 1990, Yeltsin maintained that the Union's institutional structures failed to serve Russia's interests. 'Russia must have … real sovereignty and its own domestic and foreign policies', he insisted.[18] The RSFSR Declaration of Sovereignty was soon adopted by the Congress, speeding up the disintegration process. The August coup of 1991 was also used by Yeltsin to promote a vision of Russia separate from the USSR and a republic particularly exploited and threatened by the Soviet ('imperial') centre.

And yet, the separation of sub-state national homelands from the USSR was not complete when the Soviet state ceased to exist in 1991. The process of separation was particularly unfinished in the case of the Russian Federation (RF). Even if in 1990 and 1991 the vision of Russia separate from the Soviet Union and a victim of the Union centre was relatively popular among the electorate, the RF was less obviously a national homeland of the Russian people than were the former non-Russian republics for their titular nationalities. The difference was a direct result of the contradictory Soviet policies which, while giving grounds for separating Russia from the Union, simultaneously encouraged the identification of the Russians with the entire USSR. The Russian historical narrative, effectively disseminated by the educational system, emphasised that the national specificity of the Russians lay in their role as the creators of a vast multi-national state.

Nation-Building under Yeltsin

This Soviet legacy explains why, in the aftermath of the USSR's demise, the vision of the RF, within the 1991 borders, as a national homeland for its citizens was contested by the elites and questioned by the broader public more vigorously than it was the case in most other newly

[18] Radio Moscow 2, 30 May, 1990.

independent states. The position of the Russians at the centre of a huge multi-national state made it exceptionally hard to define the membership and 'national space' of the Russian nation once this state ceased to exist. Was the Russian Federation a nation-state-in-making or a multi-national state, a mini version of the USSR? The RF inherited from the Soviet period ethnic autonomies institutionalised and perceived by 'titular nationalities' as national homelands of and for those nationalities. At the same time, ethnic Russians constituted 82 percent of the RF's population, whereas in the USSR their proportion stood at just over 50 percent. So, what role should ethnic Russians play in the newly independent Russian Federation?

Retrospectively we can note that the first post-communist Russian leadership, preoccupied with economic issues, underestimated the importance of identity politics. In the early post-communist period, in stark contrast to the deep-rooted collectivistic visions, Russian reformers perceived post-communist Russia as simply a collection of individuals who pursued their own interests. In fact, theorists of democratisation argue that the articulation of a viable national identity, which ensures that state borders are accepted as legitimate national boundaries by the population and that the membership of a nation is clearly defined, is essential for the success of democratic reforms. Before such reforms could be implemented, a community to be reformed has to be clearly defined in terms of territory and membership. A coherent liberal national ideology could also help society cope with the difficulties of the transition period.[19]

Instead, Yeltsin's leadership pursued short-term, reactive policies in the sphere of nation-building, allowing conservative Russian nationalists – those defeated in the 1990 Russian parliamentary elections, the Russian Communist Party, now promoting Russian nationalist rather than communist ideology, and Vladimir Zhirinovsky's populist and xenophobic Liberal Democratic Party – to take a lead in the construction of discourses of Russian nationhood. Numerous definitions of Russian nation- and statehood were articulated in the 1990s. These included the identification of Russia with the Soviet Union. In this vision, Soviet representations of the state and of the role of the Russians in its formation merged together with the above-mentioned Eurasian vision. Indeed, from 1992, the demise of the USSR, for which the Russian Congress of People's Deputies voted overwhelmingly in December 1991, started to be seen by many parliamentarians as a catastrophe. The independence of Ukraine, whose capital of Kiev has featured in the Russian national historical narrative as the centre of the first Russian state, proved particularly difficult to accept. And thus definitions of the Russian nation

[19] Ghia Nodia, ''Nationalism and Democracy', in Larry Diamond and Mark Plattner, eds., *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp.3-22.

which included Ukrainians and other East Slavs, Belarusians, also started to be articulated. Another key point of contention was the inclusion into the state of Ukraine of the Crimea, the region perceived even by many Russian liberals as a particularly component of the imagined Russian national space.[20] The demise of the Soviet Union left 30 million Russian speakers outside the borders of the RF. By 1993 a powerful discourse had crystallised, representing these Russian speakers as an inseparable part of the Russian nation, whose interests the RF government was obliged to represent.

As to what nationalities policies to pursue inside the RF, proposals ranged from dissolving non-Russian autonomies to creating an ethnic Russian republic within the federation, thus making the status of the Russians clearer and more comparable to those of other major nationalities. Furthermore, groups preaching racial purity and defining Russians by blood ties also became vocal. Within the RF's non-Russian ethnic republics, nation-building was vigorously promoted by the local elites largely in line with the Soviet nationalities policies (the construction of primordially defined ethnocultural identities at the sub-state level) with the incorporation into new national discourses of the criticism of the pre-revolutionary and Soviet 'Russian imperialism' and Russification.[21]

All these definitions of national identities could find predecessors in earlier intellectual and political traditions.[22] Only one definition of the Russian nation articulated in that period was novel. This was the concept of a civic *rossiiskaia* nation as a community of citizens of the RF (within the 1991 borders) regardless of their ethnicity. Its main promoter, Valerii Tishkov, ethnographer and head of the State Committee on Nationalities in 1992, dismissed the Soviet equation of nationality (*nationalnost*) with people's ethnic affiliations, insisting that it should be understood as citizenship.[23]

The debates on nation-building were driven by the media and members of the opposition, well represented in the parliament since 1993. The policies of Yeltsin's administration were fluctuating and reactive. The 1991 citizenship law promoted a de-ethnicised version of Russian identity, as it did not even require the knowledge of the Russian language in order to qualify for citizenship. At the same time, the law closely identified Russia with the Soviet Union as it allowed any former Soviet citizen an easy access to Russian citizenship. In 1993, under pressure

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[20] Vera Tolz, 'Rethinking Russian-Ukrainian Relations: A New Trend in Nation-Building in Post-Communist Russia?' *Nations and Nationalism*, 8, 2, (2002), pp.235-254.
[21] Tolz, 'Forging the Nation', pp.1006-1007, 1013-1014.
[22] Ibid.
[23] V. A. Tishkov, 'Ob idee natsii', *Oshchetvennye nauki*, 4 (1990), pp.83-95.

from the opposition, Yeltsin's government began depicting Russian speakers throughout the former USSR as an inseparable part of the Russian nation. During the 1996 presidential election campaign, in which Yeltsin was challenged by the opposition leader, the Communist Gennadii Ziuganov, the president advocated the closer integration of Russia with the CIS countries, and particularly with Ukraine and Belarus.

The new assertiveness of non-Russian autonomies, and even of some Russian regions, was dealt with by the Yeltsin administration through the policies of 'asymmetric federalism', involving the signing of bilateral treaties which specified different terms in the relationship between Moscow and the RF's constituent units. At the same time, under the influence of his liberal advisers, the Yeltsin administration also promoted the concept of *rossiiskaia natsiia* as a community of citizens regardless of their ethnicity. The definition of the national community in the 1993 Russian constitution and a search for the 'Russian idea', launched by Yeltsin in 1996, reflected the confusion among the elites in thinking about the post-communist Russian identity.[24]

Nation-Building Post-1999

Russian nation-building in the new millennium could only be understood against the background of the legacies of the Soviet period and of Yeltsin, which Putin chose to interpret in a particular way. Scholars agree that he assumed power having already formed a vision of what he wanted to achieve for Russia.[25] They differ, however, in their assessment of the nature of his nation-building project. Some scholars suggest that the second president tried to rebuild Russia on Soviet and pre-revolutionary imperial foundations,[26] others insist that Putin's rhetoric about civic nation and Russia's European orientation should be taken seriously in the assessment of the formation of Russia as a nation post-1999; and still others focus on the

[24] Tolz, 'Forging the Nation'.

[25] Alfred Evans, 'Putin's Legacy and Russia's Identity', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60, 6 (2008), pp.899-912.

[26] Angela Stent, 'Restoration and Revolution in Putin's Foreign Policy', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60, 6 (2008), pp.1089-1106; Nanci Adler, 'The Future of the Soviet Past Remains Unpredictable: The Ressurection of Stalinist Symbols Amidst the Exhumation of Mass Graves', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 57, 8 (2005), p.1110; Emil Pain, 'Patriotizm i natsionalizm'. Kruglyi stol. Fond 'Liberalnaia missiia', 18 February 2004 (www.liberal.ru/sitan.asp?Rel); Marlene Laruelle, *In the Nation of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan: 2009); Pal Kolsto and Helge Blakkisrud (eds.), *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000-2015* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Pal Kolsto and Helge Blakkisrud (eds.), *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

promotion of ethnic Russian component by Russia's current political elites.[27] It is argued here that novel elements in Putin's approach to nation-building have been very strong, even though his administration has borrowed widely from the arsenal of long-existing approaches to dealing with the nationalities question.

From the start Putin's policies were a reaction to the perceived failures of Yeltsin's administration. In 2000, the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy, set up in the 1990s as an advisory body to the president, published a report on the problems facing Russia. It flagged up the weakness of the state, blamed on Yeltsin's policies, as the main threat to Russia's security and people's well-being.[28] At the same time, Putin was well aware that the Soviet policies created conditions for the USSR's eventual disintegration along ethnic lines. The war in Chechnya, which facilitated Putin's rise to presidency in 1999, seemed to have confirmed in his mind the view that Soviet ethnic federalism, exacerbated by Yeltsin's asymmetric federalism, continued to pose a danger to Russia's unity.

In fact, Russia's ethnic autonomies never enjoyed the same rights as the USSR's Union republics. National institutions of the former were less developed, they were economically even more dependent on the centre, and their population was far more Russified. The lesser ability of the RF's ethnic republics to act as national homelands of their titular nationalities, as compared to the USSR's Union republics, could be interpreted in two ways. It could be seen as indicating that the danger of disintegration was lower in the RF than was the case with the Soviet Union. Alternatively, it could be assumed that, if Russia's disintegration were to occur, in contrast to the peaceful developments in 1991, the process would be violent, as the potential disintegration lines would be more vigorously contested. The Putin administration chose to highlight the second interpretation, thus depicting Russia as highly insecure.[29] Last, but not least, Putin agreed with the view that the Soviet policies and the developments in the first post-communist decade left the role of ethnic Russians within a multi-ethnic state unresolved.

The strengthening of the state, understood as the ability of the leadership in Moscow to control all aspects of the country's political and public life, became Putin's priority. It was to be achieved by, among other things, the construction of a compound identity for the peoples of Russia with the help of a dominant discourse of nation-building. This discourse was to be disseminated through speeches by politicians, the educational system (to be put under greater

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[27] Richard Sakwa, *Putin. Russia's Choice* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp.214-239.
[28] Ibid, p.58.
[29] Dmitrii Medvedev, 'Sokhranit effektivnoe gosudarstvo v sushchestvuiushchikh granitsakh', *Ekspert*, 13 (2005), pp.70-76.

central control than had been the case under Yeltsin), through the media (whose independence Putin curtailed), the adoption of state symbols (on which Yeltsin's government and the parliamentary opposition could not agree) and the introduction of new public holidays. The levels of attention that the Putin administration paid to the formation of a new identity among Russia's citizens could be compared to those in Stalin's period, far surpassing any efforts at nation-building in the 1990s. Yet, in contrast to the Soviet period, the compound identity was expected to be national, rather than supranational, with nation-state-building in Western Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries serving as an example.[30] In an another difference with the Soviet period, despite Putin's policies of controlling the media and silencing the opposition, discourses of identity, overtly critical of the one emanating from the Kremlin, could be articulated publicly.

We will now look at the nature and methods of the dissemination of the official discourse, as represented by the pronouncements of Putin and members of his administration, as well as those of leaders of the party of power, the United Russia. We will then consider wider public debates about how the Russian nation is to be defined and assess the perceptions of Russian national identity among the broader public.

Official Discourse

Since 2000, the presidential administration has put major efforts into the construction of a new discourse of Russian identity (*rossiiskaia identichnost*) which is, on the one hand, post-communist and, on the other, uses Soviet-style, indeed Stalinist devices, to emphasize the importance of a strong state (*gosudarstvennost*). Putin, his temporary successor Dmitrii Medvedev, and members of the government have been insisting that Russia is no longer interested in inventing its own models of modernity. Upon assuming supreme power, Putin defined the Soviet period as 'decades [when the country was] heading away from the main road of civilisation towards a dead end'.[31] In 1991, the Russian people made a new choice, embracing democracy and the market economy and rejecting isolationism and messianism.[32]

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[30] See, for instance, a round-table discussion on nationalism and patriotism organised by the 'Liberal Mission' Foundation, 18 February 2004, www.liberal.ru/sitan.asp?Rel=92.

[31] V.V. Putin, 'Rossiia na rubezhe tysiacheletii', *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 30 December, 1999, p.4.

[32] Vladimir Putin, *First Person* (London: Hutchinson, 2000), pp.210-215; A. Chadaev, *Putin: ego ideologiia* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006); Putin, 'Uroki pobedy nad natsizmom', 7 May, 2005, www.kremlin.ru/mainpage/shtml.

Putin's Russia wanted to project its power through economic means, not by exporting ideology.[33] It is erroneous to believe that the 'democratic' features of the official discourse are aimed exclusively at a foreign audience.[34] In fact, they have been articulated in politicians' speeches domestically and promoted in a new Russian history textbook, published in 2007 with the Kremlin's explicit approval.[35]

This discourse emphasised that democracy was Russia's own choice at the time when the USSR willingly ended, rather than lost, the Cold War.[36] Both Putin and Medvedev praised the 1993 constitution as an important step towards democracy. In his first address to the Federal Assembly in November 2008, Medvedev argued that this constitution marked a major break with the past, as for the first time in Russian history 'an individual … his life, his rights and property' were proclaimed 'to be the highest value'.[37] And yet, Yeltsin's government failed to take advantage of these major developments. It acted as if Russia in the 1990s was Germany in 1945, it has been argued. Under Yeltsin, the Russian state weakened to the extent that the United States was, in effect, permitted to determine Russia's policies. This state of dependency began already under Gorbachev, it has been maintained. The reforms, formulated with the help of foreign advisers who pursued their own goals, were imposed on the Russian people, without consent. Thus, Yeltsin's period was another revolution from above. Putin, in contrast, restored Russia's status as a great power to be reckoned with in the international arena. He repudiated a revolutionary approach, aiming to introduce change according to Russia's own historical traditions.[38] Since 2006, Putin's policies started to be defined as 'sovereign democracy'. The inventor of the term, the then deputy head of the presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov, argued that 'sovereign democracy' referred to the situation in which the Russian government and the Russian (*rossiiskaia*) nation alone, without foreign interference, determine the country's policies. Surkov went on to explain:

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[33] Sergei Ivanov, 'Where is Russia Heading? New Vision of Pan-European Security', www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?sprache=en&id-217.

[34] This is the argument of liberal Russian intellectuals. See, for instance, G. Zvereva, 'Diskurs gosudarstvennoi natsii v sovremennoi Rossii', in Marlene Laruelle, ed., *Sovremennye interpretatsii russkogo natsionalizma* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2007), p.64.

[35] A.V. Filippov, *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2007), pp.423-482.

[36] Ibid, p.363.

[37] www.newslab.ru/news/274105.

[38] Izvestiia, 24 April, 2003, p.1; Filippov, *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii*, p.423.

> We have no intention of inventing a specific Russian (*rossiiskaia*) democracy… At the same time, it is clear that the principles of democracy should be in line with the current developmental level of Russian society....[39]

In this discourse, 'significant Others', against whom post-Yeltsin's Russia is imagined, are clearly pin-pointed and often demonised. A tendency towards 'othering' in the construction of national identities is not specifically Soviet or Russian, as some of Putin's critics argue.[40] However, certain methods employed by the Putin administration to construct Russia's 'Others' have been influenced by Soviet practices. Under Putin, 'the West', particularly the United States of America, again became Russia's 'significant Other', with the anti-Western stance hardening particularly after Putin's re-election as president for the third term in 2012.[41] Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's governments have been consistently presented as pawns in the hands of a 'new Western colonialism' and regularly contrasted to Putin's.[42] And yet, Putin has stated on more than one occasion that Russia is part of Europe; the above-mentioned Kremlin-sanctioned history textbook also defined Russia as a major European power.[43]

The criticism and occasional demonisation of 'the West' and the identification of Russia as Europe should not be seen as an irreconcilable contradiction. The idea that Europe is not identical to its Western core dates back to the eighteenth century and, as Larry Wolff demonstrated, was a response of intellectuals in the eastern periphery of Europe to the invention by the West European elites of the category of 'Eastern Europe' as a realm between civilisation and barbarism. By separating Europe and 'the West', the 'East European' elites thus resisted the 'Orientalisation' of their societies by 'the West'.[44] At the same time, the Putin administration used Soviet, even Stalinist, methods of othering. Since 2004, following the Beslan hostage-taking crisis and the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the image of Russia as historically surrounded by external enemies who relied on internal collaborators in

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[39] http://www.newsru.com/world/24feb2005/sammit_end.html, see also N. Garadzha, ed, *Suverenitet: sbornik* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006), pp.43-64.

[40] See L. Gudkov, *Negativnaia identichnost* (Moscow: NLO, 2004) as an example of the exaggeration of the specificity of the role of 'Other' in the Russian/Soviet identity formation.

[41] 'Obrashchenie prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina', *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 6 September, 2004, p.2.

[42] Putin's interview with NBC, 12 July 2006, www.kremlin.ru/mainpage/shtml.

[43] Putin's Federal Assembly 2005 address, *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 25 April 2005; Filippov, *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii*, p.412.

[44] Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Standord: Stanford University Press, 1994).

order to destroy Russia, began to be evoked regularly by Putin's government. This approach achieved its apogee at the time of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In his public addresses, Putin paraphrases Stalin's speeches to depict Russia as a country whose threatened security could be defended only by a strong political leadership commanding unreserved loyalty from its people.[45] In rhetoric reminiscent of the Stalin period, 'internal enemies' have been identified as a major threat. Diverse constituencies, from the so-called Chechen fighters (*boeviki*) to non-governmental organisations and human rights groups, are lumped together and depicted as anti-Russian and unpatriotic. These internal enemies, it has been argued, are 'fed by the alien hand', ranging from ill-defined 'international terrorism' to the US administration.[46]

Until the annexation of Crimea, both Putin and Medvedev were, paradoxically, more consistent than the Yeltsin administration in asserting that Russia's current borders should be accepted as legitimate by the political elites and the public, even though the disintegration of the USSR was at one point described by Putin as a tragedy.[47] Between 2000 and 2014, the Russian legislation was revised in order to promote more consistently than before the concept of the multi-ethnic, state-framed (*rossiiskaia*) nationhood within the current borders of the RF. The 2002 Russian citizenship law, in comparison with its 1991 predecessor, significantly reduced special privileges of former Soviet citizens in obtaining Russian citizenship.[48] A particularly clear definition of how the Putin administration wanted to define the Russian nation could be found in the law 'On the Foundations of the State Policies on Interethnic Relations', which was intended to replace the 1996 governmental 'Concept of the State Nationalities Policies'. By the end of 2006, the new governmental line had crystallised. The main goal of the nationalities policies was defined as 'the establishment of pan-civic identity (*obshchegrazhdanskaia identichnost*), which presupposes 'the understanding by citizens of the RF of their belonging to the [state-framed, rather than ethno-cultural] Russian nation (*rossiiskaia natsiia*)'. The nation itself was defined as 'a historically formed socio-political community of the multinational people (*mnogonatsionalnyi narod*) of Russia [united] by common historical memories [and] efforts to build a strong indivisible (*edinoe*) state'. Most significantly, in comparison with the earlier versions of this law and with Yeltsin's nationalities policies concept, the draft law put to the parliament in the autumn of 2006 downplayed the

[45] 'Obrashchenie prezidenta Rossii…'.
[46] The presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly in 2004 and 2007, *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 27 May 2004 and www.president.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2007/04/125401.shtml.
[47] Putin's speech in *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 25 April, 2005.
[48] *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 20 April, 2002.

special status of ethnic Russians. They were no longer defined as 'the foundation of the state' (*opora gosudarstva*) and the only state-bearing people (*gosudarstvoobrazuiushchii narod*) in the RF, as had been the case in the earlier legislation. Instead, the role of all the nationalities of the RF in the creation of the Russian state was emphasized. Nevertheless, the role of ethnic Russians continued to be defined differently from that of other peoples, as it was the Russians who provided 'the social, linguistic and cultural basis of the [state-framed] civic Russian nation'.[49] Furthermore, in the first decade of the new millennium the Russian government introduced a range of reforms implicitly aimed at reducing the political salience of ethno-nationalism among non-Russian minorities.[50]

Russia's response to the fall of the pro-Russian government in Ukraine in 2014, which included the Crimea annexation and the sponsoring of anti-Kiev separatists in Donbass, facilitated further twists in official Russian discourse of nationhood. Russian neo-imperialism emerged as a powerful interpretative frame among academics, as well as Russian oppositional and Western politicians and journalists alike to explain the Kremlin's actions.[51] Significantly, however, Putin's references to Russia's imperial heritage and claims about a particular closeness of the Russian and Ukrainian people notwithstanding, Putin's own speeches, as well as Russian state television coverage of the annexation, explicitly rejected the neo-imperial frame. Instead, official narratives about the annexation represented it as a unification of the Russian nation within a single state. In this context, the Russian nation was defined in ethno-lingual and ethno-cultural terms, implying the lack of plans for further territorial expansion beyond Crimea.[52]

The official discourse of Russian nationhood has been thus ridden with contradictions. It promotes a range of conflicting interpretations of the relationship between contemporary Russian statehood and the Soviet and pre-revolutionary states. On the one hand, post-communist Russia is depicted as a direct continuation of the Soviet and tsarist statehoods. On the other, the emergence of the independent Russian Federation in 1991 and the adoption of the 1993 constitution are presented as a decisive break with the earlier approaches to state- and

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[49] For the analysis of the legislation, see Zvereva, 'Diskurs gosudarstvennoi natsii…', pp.22-36.

[50] Federica Prina, 'Homogenisation and the 'New Russian Citizen': A Road to Stability or Ethnic Tension?' *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 10, 1 (2011), pp.59-93.

[51] See, for example, Emil Pain, 'Contemporary Russian Nationalism in the Historical Struggle between 'Official Nationality' and 'Popular Sovereignty,' in Kolsto and Blakkisrud, eds., *Russia before and after Crimea*.

[52] Yuri Teper, 'Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?' *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32, 4, (2016), pp.378-396.

nation-building. On the one hand, echoing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Putin condemned the Soviet experiment as 'a dead end'. On the other, he explicitly utilized the rhetoric of the Stalin period, and the Kremlin-sanctioned history textbook depicts Stalin as the most effective Soviet/Russian leader of the twentieth century.[53] The discourse of the multi-ethnic civic Russian nation of the first decade of the new millennium, post-2012 has been replaced with the discourse which foregrounds the ethocultural component of nationhood and represents the Russian Federation as, above all, the state of ethnic Russians. At the same time, this latter discourse has been articulated within the context of policies that are aimed at regaining parts of Russia's former imperial domains.

Further inconsistencies in the official discourse have been introduced by the vision of Russia promoted by the United Russia party, which offers consistent support to Putin's government. The party platform depicts Russia not as part of Europe, but as a unique, self-sufficient Eurasian civilisation with 'a special humanitarian mission… to unite organically different poles of world civilisation'. The party insists that the role of ethnic Russians in the RF needs to be considered with an open mind, and not necessarily in line with the state law on interethnic relations.[54]

To merge different pasts and other elements of Russian national tradition into a single contemporary national narrative has been, of course, the intention of the Putin administration. It was already reflected in the adoption in 2000 of state symbols which creatively combined Soviet and tsarist elements. In the manifestation of this approach, 7 November (the date marking the 1917 Bolshevik revolution) was, under Putin, abolished as a public holiday, while Soviet-style military parades on Red Square to mark the Soviet victory in the Second World War were restored. Indeed, the role of the war as a major nation-building event has been reaffirmed.[55]

These attempts to create new collective memories and symbols of the nation for contemporary Russia have been only partially successful. While under Yeltsin no agreement could be reached regarding state symbols, under Putin the parliament finally approved the symbols which the president favoured. Overall, however, the contradictory nature of Putin's nation-building project has not been conducive to the societal consolidation which he aimed to

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[53] Filippov, *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii*, pp.90-94.

[54] http://edinros.ru/news.html?id=115052; http://edinros.er.ru/er/text.shtml?53365/8.

[55] Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, 'Commemorating the Past/Performing the Present: Television Coverage of World War 2 Victory Celebration and the (De)Construction of Russian Nationhood', in Birgit Beumers et al. eds., *The Post-Soviet Russian Media* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp.137-157.

achieve. Moreover, the rhetoric of civic nationhood has been consistently undermined by the use of crude devices to picture the world and Russia itself as sharply divided into 'us' and 'them' and by policies which have curtailed the freedom of the media, reduced the role of elections, particularly at the regional level, suppressed the opposition and non-governmental organisations and subjected civilians in Chechnya to constant violence. The neo-imperial nature of the annexation of Crimea and its simultaneous representation by the most influential state media outlets in ethnonational terms further undermine the project of civic nation-building. The very use of the word 'civic' in the definition of the nation is somewhat misleading. Putin's 'civic nation' does not acknowledge the role of civil society, but is defined almost exclusively by the people's involvement in state-building. In fact, manifestations of extreme ethnic nationalism among the ethnic Russian majority and non-Russian minorities not only failed to diminish, but by 2010 seemed to be on the rise.

Within the context of the contradictory official discourse of Russian nationhood and a direct clash between important elements of this discourse and actual policies, various symbolic actions which the government initiates with the view of consolidating society end up highlighting societal divisions. A case in point are the divergent interpretations of a new national holiday, the Day of National Unity (4 November), introduced in 2005 to commemorate the defeat by the Russian popular militia of 'foreign interventionists' who occupied Moscow in 1612. Since the nineteenth century the events of 1612 have been depicted in the Russian intellectual tradition as a milestone in the construction of national identity, being interpreted as an example of the defence by popular efforts of Russia's independence and of the restoration of order, following the so-called Time of Troubles. Explaining the rationale for introducing the new holiday, the Putin administration argued that in 1612 various nationalities of Russia, already a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state, took part in the restoration of Russian statehood. Direct parallels with contemporary Russia were obvious. Under Putin, as in 1612, Russia restored its sovereignty in relation to the interfering Western powers. (In 1612, the invaders were Poles, who constituted 'the West' for Rus.) Yeltsin's period was Russia's new Time of Troubles.

Yet, rather than accepting the official interpretation, different groups chose to attribute different symbolic meanings to the new holiday, suggesting either civic or ethnic understanding of Russian identity. The leader of the liberal Yabloko party, Grigorii Yavlinskii, praised the presidential initiative, interpreting the events of 1612 as a 'celebration of civil society' and rejecting the view that the holiday was anti-Western. In turn, as 4 November was an important holiday of the Russian Orthodox Church, and because the established historical narrative of the

1612 events emphasized the importance of Orthodoxy in making people rise against the Catholic invaders, representatives of the Church appropriated the new holiday to promote a special role of Orthodoxy in Russian state- and nation-building. Last but not least, radical Russian nationalist and racist groups attempted to stage demonstrations on 4 November to articulate their exclusive and xenophobic vision of the Russian nation.[56]

Public Debates

Public debates over the Russian nationhood intensified since 2000, as various programmes of how to create a consolidated state-nation (*gosudarstvo-natsiia*) on the territory of the RF have been articulated by pro-governmental and oppositional think-tanks and intellectuals. The official discourse of nation-building is often criticised. Conservatives attack the idea of a state-framed multi-ethnic nation (*rossiiskaia natsiia*) as a variant of 'the Bolshevik internationalism', arguing that the new Russian statehood should be ethnic and based on the 'hierarchy of ethnocultural values', i.e. the supremacy of ethnic Russians.[57] At the same time, a neo-Eurasian model of Russian nationhood remains highly popular, of which the works of Aleksandr Dugin and Aleksandr Panarin are particularly indicative. Numerous studies, claiming to represent fruits of academic scholarship, talk about Russia as a unique Eurasian civilisation, in whose creation special national characteristics of ethnic Russians, including the values of the Russian Orthodox Church, played a decisive role. These studies argue that Russia has invented unique models of development which are destined to present alternatives to hegemonic, Western forms of modernity. Significantly, these theories are disseminated through the educational system, which continues to be relatively decentralised.[58]

In turn, such liberal academics as sociologist Emil Pain and Tishkov critically note that, rather than building a nation-state, the Putin administration has allowed the state to submerge the nation (*ogosudartvlevonie natsii*). In their view, current discourses of nation-state building dwell too much on the role of ethnic Russians, thereby both deliberately and unwittingly stimulating the growth of xenophobic Russian nationalism and engendering a situation threatening to the non-Russian minorities. The potential impact of legitimate concerns expressed by liberal observers is

[56] www.calend.ru/holidays/0/0/94/ , www.yabloko.ru/Publ/2005/2005_11/051102_intf_presskonf.html, www.rusmarsh.org/.
[57] www.rusdoctrina.ru/index.php?subject=5.
[58] Viktor Shnirelman, 'Tsivilizatsionnyi podkhod kak natsionalnaia ideia', in Laruelle, ed., *Sovremennye interpretatsii russkogo natsionalizma*, pp.217-248.

weakened by their tendency to view 'Western' experiences of nation-building uncritically, as a solely bottom-up project of the integration of equal citizens able to freely exercise their choices.[59] The liberals' tendency to view much of the discussion of the role of ethnic Russians as necessarily undermining the RF's inter-ethnic cohesion and to perceive non-Russian nationalisms only as a reaction to ethnic Russian domination further weakens their analysis.

Societal Perception

Societal perceptions of Russian identity have been unsurprisingly influenced by official discourses of nationhood. By the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, in line with the Kremlin's position, 88% of those polled in 2019 by the main independent Russian polling agency, the Levada Centre, suggested that Russia should always remain a great power and 75% of those polled said they believed that the country achieved that status and they were particularly proud of it.[60] The post-2014 confrontation between Russia and the West around Russia's policies towards Ukraine and the accompanying anti-Western official discourse have led to the reversal of public perceptions of Russia as either a European or a non-European nation. If in 2008 over half of those polled by the Levada Centre identified Russia as a European nation versus 37% who thought it was non-European, in 2019 55% described Russia as a non-European nation, versus 36% who perceived Russia as part of Europe.[61] At the same time, the influences are not unidirectional and it is clear that the Kremlin-sponsored narratives also take into account grassroots trends and they are articulated in response to societal expectations. It is noteworthy that while celebrating the Crimea annexation, according to opinion polls, most citizens of Russia demonstrated no appetite for other territorial expansions.[62] This attitude explains why official Russian media framed the coverage of the annexation with reference to ethnonational unification of the Russians in a very specific context of Crimea, rather than as a neo-imperial project.[63]

At the same time, the impact of exclusive ethnic Russian nationalism on society at large has grown since 1999, with the trend peaking in 2013, with the subsequent slight decline by the

[59] Pain's contribution to a 2004 round-table discussion 'Patriotizm i natsionalizm', www.liberal.ru/sitan.asp?Rel=.
[60] https://www.levada.ru/2019/01/17/natsionalnaya-identichnost-i-gordost/
[61] https://www.levada.ru/2019/09/10/otnoshenie-k-stranam-4/
[62] Mikhail A. Alexseev and Henry E. Hale, 'Rallying 'round the Leader More than the Flag: Changes in Russian Nationalist Public Opinion, 2013-14,' in Kolsto and Blakkisrud, eds., *New Russian Nationalism*, pp. 192-220.
[63] Teper, 'Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea…'

end of that decade. In 2013, as many as 62% of the Levada-Centre respondents feared violent inter-ethnic clashes and 54% supported the introduction of policies that would limit the ability of people from the Caucasus to live in Russia.[64] This is particularly striking, given that North Caucasus is part of the Russian Federation and that North Caucasians are citizens of the Russian Federation. Again the results of these polls demonstrate the interaction of bottom-up and top-down identitarian narratives. From the second half of 2012 to the summer of 2013, Russian state television channels waged an unprecedented campaign against 'migrants'. This vaguely defined category included Russia's own citizens from the North Caucasus who moved to reside in cities of central Russia, including Moscow. A particularly noticeable upward spike in anti-migrant and anti-Caucasian feelings in 2013 might well have been connected with this campaign and these feelings' subsequent decline to the campaign's abrupt end. However, the very campaign that took place within the context of mayoral elections in Moscow was the authorities' attempt to exploit societal xenophobia and prevent the anti-Kremlin nationalist opposition from capitalizing on this societal trend.[65]

Conclusions

The labelling of Putin's policies as merely neo-imperial or neo-Soviet is not conducive to the understanding of the nature of his nation-building project. Since 2000 we have witnessed the most consistent and assertive attempt at Russian nation-building ever undertaken by the political elites. West-European nation-building models have constituted an important source of inspiration. Significantly, governmental advisors have been studying carefully the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nation-building experiences in Europe, while current trends of identity formation under the impact of the European integration and globalisation have been less well appreciated.[66] The reason for this approach is that members of the presidential administration believe that, in terms of nation-building, the RF is at an earlier stage of development than other European societies. At the same time, it is assumed that being a fully-fledged nation is an essential part of European modernity, to which post-communist

[64] https://www.levada.ru/2015/08/25/ksenofobiya-i-natsionalizm/

[65] Vera Tolz and Sue-Ann Harding, 'From "Compatriots" to "Aliens": The Changing Coverage of Migration on Russian Television,' *The Russian Review*, 73, 3 (2015), pp.452-477.

[66] V.V. Lapkin, 'Modernizatsiia, globalizatsiia, identichnost, obshchie problemy i rossiiskie osobennosti', *Polis*, 3 (2008), pp.50-58.

Russian governments, including Putin's, see no alternative any rhetoric about Russia's Eurasian identity notwithstanding.

Notwithstanding major changes which have occurred post-1945 in how the elites and peoples in Western Europe define their identities, the impact of the formative times in West European nation-building – the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries – is still very significant today. In the case of the Russians, these formative times fell on Stalin's period. So it is in fact unsurprising, rather than shocking, that cultural and historical narratives about the role of the Russians and the devices for creating the nation's significant 'Others' of that period still have a major hold on contemporary Russian politicians and members of society, whose formative years were in Soviet times. The ambiguous position of the Russians in the USSR, which also crystallised in the 1930s, shaped the dynamics of the Russian nationalist movement post-1953 as well as the role of the RSFSR in the demise of the Soviet Union. It continues to underline the conflict between the visions of post-communist Russia as either a multi-ethnic state of and for all its nationalities or as primarily an ethnic Russian homeland. Putin's nation-building project placed this conflict at the centre of public debates, but did not make its resolution any more achievable.